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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1967

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 7534

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5837

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0022

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 7073

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002488

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2029

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: KING BHUMIBOL'S HOSPITALIZATION,
PURPORTEDLY NOT SERIOUS, REACHES TWO WEEKS

BANGKOK 00002488 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Charge a.i. James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (S) Summary/Comment: By all accounts, public and private, 81-year old King Bhumibol's ongoing ailments which led to his hospitalization September 16 are not particularly serious. None of the insiders who would be genuinely concerned were his health in true danger seem worried -- in contrast to December 2008. However, as the hospitalization reaches the two-week mark, and the now daily public medical updates indicate that a low-grade fever/lung infection returned after disappearing for several days, the King's inability to bounce back quickly from an apparently minor infection highlights his declining, fragile health. It also serves as another reminder that Thailand will face momentous changes during royal succession once he passes, uncertainties around which have already been affecting political dynamics for several years. Septel will look at the relation between succession-related issues, lingering political turmoil, and possible factors/scenarios, in more detail. End Summary/Comment.

No problem? Yet Still Hospitalized after two weeks

¶2. (C) Officially, King Bhumibol was admitted to Siriraj hospital on Saturday September 19, according the Royal Household Bureau, which started issuing daily bulletins on Sunday, September 20, the day that a well-wishers book was opened for signature, starting with PM Abhisit and Army Commander Anupong. The Ambassador was the first diplomat to sign the book, on September 21; palace officials on hand in the hospital were completely relaxed and indicated the King's health issues were not serious. Army chief Anupong and Chief of Staff Prayuth, known to be very close to Queen Sirikit, told a small group of diplomats September 22 the same thing, without any sense of evident concern: the King was in good shape, the reasons for hospitalization not serious.

¶3. (C) This relaxed attitude, which continues, is in contrast to the reaction last December, when the King suffered from bronchitis, was treated on an I.V. drip at the Dusit Palace, and missed his birthday speech. One of the palace officials who has been relaxed the past ten days, M.L. Anuporn Kashemsant, was distraught and disheveled when we met him last December; at the time, he had lined up the royal

motorcade to take the King from the Dusit Palace to Siriraj Hospital, stayed up all night, and showed evident concern about Bhumibol's condition.

14. (C) The current hospitalization has not been entirely smooth, however. Apart from an apparent "W" shaped recovery -- a low fever and lung infection returned after the King was fever free for several days, according to the daily public bulletins -- our contacts with sources inside the King's medical team and palace circles indicate that the King was actually first admitted at Siriraj on September 16, after a routine September 15 check-up uncovered some "minor" concerns. We heard about the hospitalization on September 18, two days before it became public, and a day before the hospitalization supposedly started.

15. (S) The four-day delay in the Royal Household Bureau issuing the first health bulletin, and the shaving of the time of the hospitalization by three days, indicates the sensitivity and uncertainty with which palace officials approach the issue of the King's health, minor or not, and how much information to release to the public, even when the situation apparently is not one for concern. That approach, in turn, raises questions about how the palace will handle more serious medical situations in the future, including the eventual day practically no one in Thailand wishes to see: the incapacitation and death of the beloved King Bhumibol.

Reminder of the Bigger Issue to come: Succession

16. (S) Our contact who first tipped us off to the hospitalization noted that this current hospitalization, like the King's illness at the end of 2008, occurred in the wake

BANGKOK 00002488 002.2 OF 002

of royal family members being perceived to be engaged in politicking, despite the standard that the royal family should remain above politics: the Queen's attendance at an October 2008 funeral for a yellow-shirt PAD (People's Alliance for Democracy) supporter killed October 7 after being hit in the chest by a police-fired, Chinese-made tear gas canister, presaged last year's hospital stint; and the Crown Prince's ongoing lobbying for a certain police general (Chumpol Manmai) to be named the next national police chief, against the nominee of PM Abhisit, who, it is widely rumored, has received the backing of Queen Sirikit frames the current story. Another potential family-related factor in bouts of the King's poor health was the death and funeral of his sister Galyani: his October 2007 stroke/hospitalization paralleled her terminal decline (they were in the same hospital), and the December 2008 illness occurred after the evident strain of Galyani's elaborate cremation rites.

17. (S) There is clearly no way for anyone to analyze accurately the King's state of mind, or draw certain conclusions between political developments, possible mental stress, and his physical ailments. However, one long-time expat observer of the Thai scene, present in Thailand since 1955, has repeatedly asserted to us over the past year that the King shows classic signs of depression -- "and why wouldn't he, seeing where his Kingdom has ended up after 62 years, as his life comes to an end" -- and claims that such mental anguish likely does affect his physical condition/failing health.

18. (S) It is hard to underestimate the political impact of the uncertainty surrounding the inevitable succession crisis which will be touched off once King Bhumibol passes. Over the past year, nearly every politician and analyst, when speaking privately and candidly, regardless of political affiliation or colored perspective, has identified succession as the principal political challenge facing Thailand today, much more important than normal political issues of coalition management or competition for power, which clearly do factor into the mix of political dynamics.

¶9. (S) The dynamics in the ultimate end game/last days of King Bhumibol would likely differ considerably depending on who was the Prime Minister, the governing coalition, the army chief, and the leading Privy Councilors at that time, and whether the King passed away suddenly or lingered in an incapacitated state for a long period of time. Various different political actors shape their short and medium-term plans accordingly.

¶10. (S) It is entirely possible King Bhumibol will return to his Hua Hin seaside palace several hours south of Bangkok in the coming days and live quietly for many years - postponing the day of reckoning and change that will inevitably come. In the meantime, the bustle of normal politics and changing societal attitudes will continue apace, while Thais keep a wary eye on the health of their ailing King.

ENTWISTLE